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Denouement of a deep-cover story and a soberer view of staff agent potentialities.

A STAFF AGENT'S SECOND THOUGHTS

Louis Boifeuillette

Some time ago I wrote you about my first two years in Songhai, West Africa, where I was covered as representative of a well-known American firm, the Hefner Brewing Company, promoting sales in the former French colony.[1] Originally, you recall, Hefner had planned to build a brewery there, but the Songhai government, which was to have shared in the project, backed out, largely as a result of its pro-Communist and anti-U.S. leanings. Then there had developed, at time of my last writing, a quite acute foreign exchange shortage—for which the government's stupid and anti-Western economic policies were much to blame—and this was seriously curtailing business activity. I should like you to know how this all turned out and to share with you some further ideas about staff agent projects.

Operations

After the fall of 1963 the Songhai economy continued its decline, and with it the fortunes of Société Hefner, the subsidiary I had formed to handle imports. The squeeze was really very simple: imports were controlled by licenses, and the government issued fewer and fewer of these. By early 1965 hardly any licenses were being given the importers who normally handled the bulk of the provisions trade; all beer was imported by a state-owned corporation through its central purchasing office in Paris. For several months, therefore, before November 1965, when I left for good, the business activity of my cover company was virtually nil. I announced my intention to leave a few months in advance and released the local staff in stages.

During these last two years my operational work included continued handling of a third national, aiding a Communist defector, and recruiting an African agent and another third national. My legitimately acquired affiliation with the French financial magazine had come to an end, primarily because I had not had time for the work.

[1] See "Letter from a Staff Agent," *Studies* VII 4, p. 47 ff.

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but I had been given a national press cover which enabled me to stay in the press community. Through this I met quite a number of East European diplomats and press people and was able to do a lot of spotting and assessing, though no recruiting.

Such, then, were the developments in the last two years. My work for the cover company was much the same as before except that it declined in intensity and toward the end I had rather too much time on my hands. Operational activity had its dry and its fruitful spells, as it usually has. My main purpose in writing again is to offer some reflections based on these four and a half years, including some that vary appreciably from those I voiced before. My own views are in large part corroborated by the experience of another unofficial-cover man, a career agent, formerly a staffer, who was in Songhai for about three of these years; he has since resigned. We discussed our common problems on many occasions and I am sure he would agree with what I say.

Isolation

In my last letter I made much of the strain a staff agent suffers in being cut off from the mainstream of his life's work, in going from a very high exposure to intelligence personnel and activity down to the point where he rarely sees anyone in his professional field. The concomitant is that he is also cut off from the sources of intimate knowledge he formerly had about international affairs and the target country, and his capital stock of such knowledge rapidly dwindles, particularly in a place such as Songhai where the press and radio are government-controlled. He can, to be sure, listen to foreign broadcasts and read the foreign press, but a newspaper published, say, in Paris carries very little on Songhai. Locally published information on political life is ludicrously limited.

To illustrate the other side of the coin, a Soviet illegal operating in London could, by reading three or four daily newspapers, know enough of current affairs to be able to handle properly a sophisticated agent in the Foreign Office, say. Or in running a military agent, there are a number of specialized journals which would give the Soviet illegal a detailed knowledge of the subject matter. None of this is possible in a place such as Songhai.

A case illustrating this difficulty was that of the African in the Songhai foreign ministry whom I had recruited in my second year. This man was appointed ambassador to an important African country, and I turned him over to the station there to handle. It then transpired

that he regularly made quite long visits back to Songhai, during which it would be worth while to have him see a local case officer. At the time of his first visit, I believe it was, I was on leave and my chief, under official cover at the embassy, met him, using a reserve communications system. It was immediately apparent that my chief was much better able than I to make the most of the man's knowledge. During this period a lot of complicated moves were in progress in the relationship between Songhai and the other country and also in the general field of African unity. My chief read all the State and Agency traffic which I never saw at all. Our relative skills as agent handlers apart, he did a much better job than I, and he continued to handle the agent.

During the last few months I was handling two agents, an African and a third national. The African, a junior civil servant, merely brought me out passports and visa application forms, and the third national operated in a field closely associated with my import business which I had therefore thoroughly mastered. Neither of these was extremely valuable, but they were worth while. The point is that these were the kind of agents whose handling was simple enough for a man in my position to do effectively.

Preservation of Cover

I have said that toward the end of my tour I had rather too much time on my hands as my cover job petered out. Now this needs some explanation; you may well ask why, if the guy had so little to do in the Hefner office, he didn't go out and develop some agents. The answer is that by and large you cannot do much unless you have a valid reason for seeing a potential agent at his place of work, and this depends on your cover activity. You cannot simply barge into a man's office and start developing him. If you are in the embassy, your chances of manufacturing a valid reason for doing this with respect to a worth-while prospect are much better. But a beer salesman cannot just drop in on a police official, or on someone in the foreign ministry, or on an army officer. You may meet the man at a social function or at a club, but that will be after office hours.

The other factor in not having enough cover activity is the security question. It is true that other people in the beer business were aware that my volume had shrunk—as theirs had—but there was, more by good luck than good judgment, a built-in stayability element in my cover. My business card read "Area Manager—West Africa," and this meant that I covered all the countries in West Africa. I did

not visit all of them, nor did I spend much time or money on trips. But I had enough legitimate or semi-legitimate Hefner business, coupled with enough intelligence business, to visit five or six countries, making perhaps one excursion every three months. I made a point of letting people know of these trips, and as no one in Songhai had the slightest idea what I did in Mali, they merely thought another energetic American was out beating the bushes to get more business. I spell this out because what sounds a little like a gimmick became an entirely valid and efficient means of shoring up cover.

While on the subject of cover I should express my conviction that no non-American—African, Russian, French—ever suspected my intelligence affiliation. Not even when a Satellite intelligence service took an interest in me as a potential agent (a coopted trade mission member did the spotting and an intelligence officer in the Satellite embassy the assessment). My cover had excellent security. The one group who may have suspected me were the political and economic people in the U.S. embassy, and this stemmed, I believe, from my long stay in the Washington area. I had not met any of these people in Washington, and I avoided seeing too much of them in Songhai. But I feel that they had thoughts about me, especially when great amounts of publicity were given to CIA in the Songhai press as part of the Soviet-inspired world-wide campaign. On the other hand, this campaign made the atmosphere in Songhai sufficiently spooky that there was no loose talk by the Americans, and for that I am entirely grateful.

Limitations

When I wrote before, I made a considerable argument that the targeting of a staff agent in a small developing country could be overdone. I said that it would be difficult to place him in a really hot target such as the foreign ministry, the security forces, or the governing party, and that in a small capital city he could, under any cover, cultivate a wide range of valuable contacts within a year or two. This is true up to a point, but in looking over the agents I recruited, or the worth-while contacts I developed, I find that all the agents and nearly all of the contacts were persons whom I met and developed through my cover activity. I must be more specific—I met the agents through the beer business, most of the valuable contacts through my press affiliation. For instance, the African who became the ambassador had been a provisions merchant and still ran his business on the side. I first met him through a beer sale and this brought me regu-

larly in contact with him during the development stage and later provided excellent cover for meetings after his recruitment.

I still feel that the really exceptional man who can just wow everyone in no time flat and recruit people right and left can be put in any viable cover position in a small developing country. But the majority of our case officers, including me, should be better directed toward targets and frequently reguided through as much communication as possible. The point is that the case officer needs a valid reason for seeing a potential recruit during the development. You can't do it all at cocktail parties, and transacting legitimate business or discussing business problems is an excellent way of developing a man. This, after all, is what the case officer under embassy cover does. He has a valid reason for talking to just about anyone, for all the world knows that he is supposed to inform his government on what is going on.

Because, in part, of these built-in handicaps which began to become apparent as time went by, my unofficial-cover colleague and I found ourselves turning into support agents. This is in no wise a complaint. During a dull period I was glad, for instance, to rent a house and operate it as a temporary listening post for some headquarters technicians; and there were other such jobs in connection with audio operations. At a small station the chief must make use of whatever assets he has, and there is no question of anyone being too proud to do any kind of job. But if this goes too far it means that the service is paying a high salary and high administrative (housing, travel, education, etc.) expenses for a support agent. This may be justified if the product of the activity is good, but over the long run there will very likely be a waste of skill and money.

This boils down to the fact that headquarters has to do considerably more planning in advance of dispatching an unofficial-cover agent, has to have more dialog with officers on the target scene. Otherwise, if the agent is placed much on the basis of guess-work, it will result in a higher percentage of misfires, whether it is the man or the circumstances that throw things off. But there is a real need for staff-type agents, and one man's experience may contribute a mite toward making the most of them.